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## FACILITATING INTERDISCIPLINARY EXCHANGE THE SUSSEX RESEARCH HIVE

### SUMMARY

The Sussex Research Hive, a designated area for the research community at the University of Sussex, was established as part of a major refurbishment project within the University Library in 2010. An example of a «Zwischenraum», designed for neither learning or teaching, it is intended as an area for both quiet study and to facilitate interdisciplinary exchange and collaboration. Supported by a gift from the publisher SAGE, the Research Hive has three facilitators, the Research Hive Scholars, who promote the use of the area and provide peer-led support for the research community. This chapter explores the issues that the University of Sussex has faced in creating a successful «Zwischenraum», arguing that an institution cannot dictate how informal areas are used, but can encourage exchange and collaboration by providing peer support around an area.

## 1 UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX LIBRARY

In recent years the UK has seen a number of library refurbishments and re-configurations of library space. The growth in the amount of information now available online as well as changes in students' learning habits has led to discussions about the nature of physical spaces within the changing Higher Education environment, and the development within libraries of more flexible spaces for collaborative working, improvements in technology and a focus on the remodelling of library spaces to encourage learning (JISC, 2006). This redesign in library spaces has also seen a reassignment of some areas back to researchers and the creation of dedicated spaces for the researcher community such as the Research Exchange at the University of Warwick (Carroll, 2011) and the Graduate School Reading Room in the University of Leicester Library.

The University of Sussex is the first of the new wave of UK universities established during the 1960s. It is a single site campus, which is located just outside the city of Brighton on the South coast of England. As a research-led university, it has subject strengths across the sciences, social sciences and humanities. Student numbers currently total 13 000, with a research community comprising of 1 000 doctoral researchers and several hundred academic staff. In order to strengthen and coordinate its services for researchers, the university has recently created a Doctoral School.

Designed by Basil Spence, the University Library is a focal point on campus, located just off the main campus square. It has been extended twice since it opened in the 1960s. A major refurbishment project took place from 2009 – 2011 to create «an inspirational Library that will serve as a focal point for students and staff» (University of Sussex, 2008, p. 22) as an important part of the university's strategic plan, including improved technology, wireless networking and lighting, as well as the introduction of a variety of new learning spaces, both collaborative and reflective. The refurbishment included the co-location of the University's Careers and Employability Centre and the opening of a new Library café.

The Library at Sussex has a strong tradition of providing a high level of support to the research community. Unlike many university libraries, its academic liaison structure is based on function and not subject, with a dedicated Research Support Team responsible for providing services for the research community. This team contributes a number of regular information skills group sessions as part of the Doctoral School's Researcher Development programme, as well as holding individual consultations with research-

ers to support their information needs. It also organises an annual seminar series on information-related issues of importance to the research community, covering topics such as the future of the book, open access publishing and effective research data management. The creation of a dedicated space for the university's research community within the Library was part of the original project plans and fitted with the Library's own mission to enhance its support for research. Finally, the Research Hive was developed in close liaison with the university's Doctoral School.

## 2 DEVELOPING A SPACE FOR EXCHANGE

There is currently a move to increase research interdisciplinarity within the UK, with the Research Councils supporting an increasing amount of this form of research. Sussex has a tradition of working across traditional discipline boundaries, and in 2010 five research themes were set up to foster partnership working across the university. The vision for the Research Hive was that it would form another mechanism to bring together researchers and to create an environment within which this exchange and partnership can happen, breaking down hierarchical and disciplinary boundaries.

One of the challenges faced in trying to encourage exchange between researchers is that research can – by its very nature – be isolating. Academic staff have an ever growing administrative burden and teaching commitment in addition to the research they undertake. In the UK, there has also been a steady increase in the number of doctoral students who undertake their studies part-time (HEFCE, 2011) and so may not visit the campus regularly, choosing to work remotely instead. Furthermore, with the growth in the number of library resources now available online, there is less reason for researchers to visit the Library, even amongst the humanities where it has traditionally been seen as a community base.

Members of the Sussex Library team visited two new postgraduate facilities within other UK libraries prior to the opening of the Research Hive: the Wolfson Research Exchange at the University of Warwick, and the Graduate School Reading Room in the David Wilson Library at the University of Leicester. This helped to visualise and define what we wanted to achieve within the space as well as highlight some of the potential issues:

- How much did we want to create a sense of ownership of the space from within the research community? It was important that researchers were able to feel comfortable and safe within the space, but did we want to



1 The Sussex Research Hive from the outside

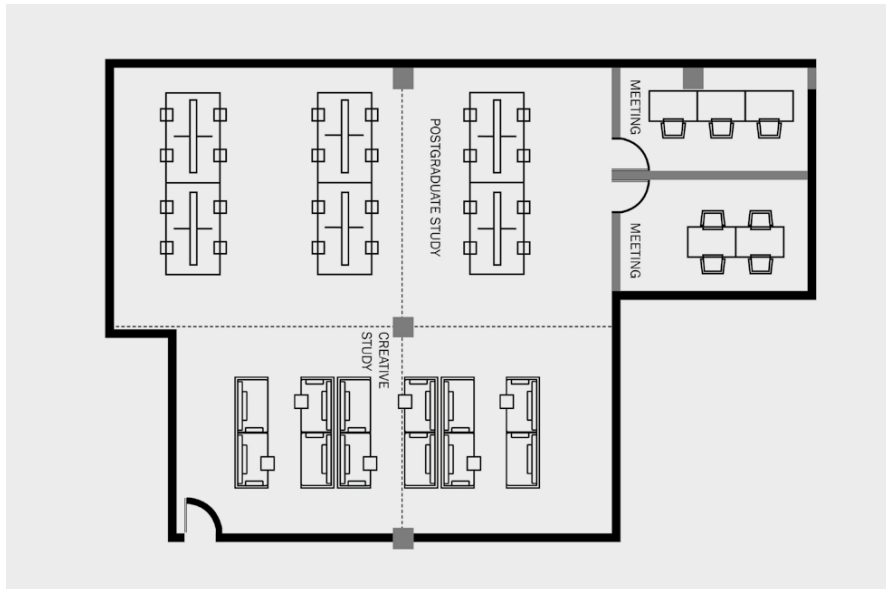
create a «home from home» where they could, for example, reserve seats by leaving their belongings?

- There was a potential for tension between the use of a space for silent study required by many researchers and its use as a collaborative space, which by its very nature creates noise.
- How should we go about encouraging interdisciplinary exchange that could lead to collaboration? At Warwick, a number of «Research Exchange Advisors» had been employed. These were members of the doctoral community whose role was to provide technical and administrative support for the activities taking place within the Research Exchange as well as to encourage networking amongst the research community.
- The designated research spaces in the David Wilson Library and the Warwick Research Exchange were much larger than what was available at Sussex – 70 seats at Warwick and 200 at Leicester. Would this have implications for what we were able to achieve at Sussex?

### 3 THE SUSSEX RESEARCH HIVE

The Sussex Research Hive, located on the 2nd floor of the Library, was the first part of the refurbishment to be completed and opened in October 2010. It has a large glass wall separating it from the main body of the Library, and offers access to researchers via a card entry system (fig. 1). The Hive is open during Library opening hours, which includes 24 hour access during term time.

Approximately 130 m<sup>2</sup>, it contains two small bookable workrooms, as well as a large open plan space, containing 24 traditional seating spaces, some



2 Learning and research spaces within the Sussex Research Hive

of which are equipped with computers, and a more comfortable seating space with large heavy sofas (fig. 2). The workrooms, which can hold up to eight people, are bookable online through the Library's room booking system and are available to all researchers. The larger of the two rooms has a PC, projector and smartboard. There is also excellent Wi-Fi throughout. Situated on the south side of the building, the Hive has large windows and benefits from good natural light. The bespoke furniture was designed to fit in with the original furniture designed for the Library by Basil Spence.

The location of the Research Hive within the Library rather than elsewhere on the university campus is an important part of its unique character. The Library is a neutral space, not owned by or biased towards one particular discipline or department. As a space it is able to bridge hierarchical and disciplinary boundaries, is open and welcoming to all members of the university. It is safe, with long opening hours, and it benefits from being a space already associated with learning and research, unlike the Students' Union, for example, which is a purely social space. On the other hand, the location of the Hive within the Library has also presented some challenges. For example, traditionally, the Library has been understood as a place for quiet study, and although a significant proportion of the Library has been designed for undergraduate social study, that idea persists with the regular users from the humanities. This can create a tension with its role as a place for exchange.

Another challenge concerns food and drink. From a general point of view, libraries are examples of «third places», a term coined by Oldenburg (1999), spaces which are neither work or home, but which are central to a community's vitality. Oldenburg argues that the provision of refreshments

is a key characteristic of the comfortable and welcoming environment of the third place, and many UK libraries have relaxed their rules to allow food and drink to be brought in. However, the Library at Sussex has a strict policy of not allowing any food and drink within the building, and only bottled water is permitted.

## 4 RESEARCH HIVE SCHOLAR SCHEME

Central to the development of the research space at Sussex was the Library's partnership with the publisher SAGE, which was formally established in September 2010, just before the opening of the Research Hive. This relationship, developed by a senior member of staff from each institution, was built on common interests between the Library's vision for the development of its support for researchers, and the desire of SAGE to learn more about the research process itself (Harvell & Folan, 2012). The Library benefitted from a gift from the publisher to develop its researcher support programme, which was used to fund the Research Hive Scholar scheme.

### 4.1 Creating support for the space

While the new research space was being developed, the Library was in the middle of a busy and noisy refurbishment and was heavily used by undergraduates. In line with many other UK universities, the number of visits by researchers to the Library at Sussex was dropping (Brown & Swan, 2007). How could they be enticed back into the Library? It was therefore vital to advocate and promote the space within the research community, and evidence from our existing liaison experience suggested that this could best be carried out by someone from inside the community, and not by a member of Library staff who might be viewed as an outsider or as representing the institution. In order to do this, the Research Hive Scholarships were created as a joint initiative between the Library and Doctoral School.

Three members of the doctoral community, selected by application and interview carry out the role in return for a bursary of £ 3 000:

- Acting as the «faces» of the Research Hive, engaging researchers in peer-led developmental activities.
- Providing an important bridge between the Library and Doctoral School and the community which they serve.
- Developing the researcher community in partnership with other units on



campus such as the Careers and Employability Centre and the Teaching and Learning Development Unit.

Designed as an annual competition, the scholarships also provide doctoral students with the opportunity to gather skills such as event-organising, marketing, presenting, and providing peer support (Ball, 2012). It was originally expected that the three scholars would cover the different subject clusters: arts and humanities, social sciences and science. However, the nine scholars appointed between 2009 and 2012 have all been from the arts and humanities and the social sciences. It is perhaps because the process of research in these subject areas is more isolating that we have received higher applications, whereas the science subjects tend to engender lab-based communities so that doctoral researchers do not feel the same need to connect with others.

#### **4.2 The role of the Research Hive Scholars**

A key role for the Scholars is to inform the Library and Doctoral School exactly how the Hive is being used, as well as to make recommendations for its future development. It has been vital to demonstrate the value and usage of the space as it was the first time that we excluded our large and demanding undergraduate population from one part of the Library. For the assessment of how the space is being used as well as to provide support and advice to the community each scholar commits approximately six hours per week, two of these hours within the Hive. The scholars work together to set up a timetable for the time they spend in the space to fit around their other commitments and also to ensure that they are able to assess usage at different times of the day.

An important role for the first generation of scholars was to raise awareness of the existence of the Research Hive and promote its use. This was carried out through visits to other teams and individuals within the university whose role was to provide support for researchers, as well as departmental induction events for new doctoral students. The scholars were quick to liaise with other users of the Hive about additional equipment needed for the space, and within the first few months of opening, a projector and smartboard were added to one of the meeting rooms, a plasma screen was installed, which provided up-to-date information about resources and events for researchers within the university, a cupboard was built for the Hive Scholars to store their records securely, and a notice board was added which gave information about the Hive Scholars and their availability.

### 4.3 Creating a physical and virtual space

In reaching out to the research community, it was important to recognise that not all researchers were regular visitors to the Library, or even the university campus. Sussex, like many other UK universities, has a high proportion of part-time doctoral students and also runs an international professional doctorate at its Department of Education, a distance-learning course which requires its participants to be on campus for just three to four weeks each summer. Moreover, a physical study space within the library appeals more to traditional library users from the humanities and the social sciences than to science researchers based in their laboratories.

It was therefore crucial for the Hive to have a virtual identity in addition to its physical one, and so the Hive Scholars have developed their own blog, Twitter presence and a Facebook page. This gives researchers as many opportunities as possible for contacting and engaging with the scholars and each other. The online presence is managed by the scholars, and so, is not perceived as being official or belonging to the Library or Doctoral School. The scholars have used these methods of communication not only to promote events and activities, but also to reflect on their own experiences of the research process.

### 4.4 Events within the Hive

In order to foster collaboration and a sense of community, a number of events have been held within the space, starting with a launch event in October 2010, to which the whole community was invited. The first generation of Hive Scholars quickly identified a need for events which were not formally organised by the university, but that provided an opportunity for discussion and learning somewhere between the formal processes of the university and the informal and social doctoral community. Peer-discussion events were set up where researchers were invited to share experiences and advice around key topics, such as «writing your thesis» and «how to get started with teaching undergraduates». Feedback for the events was very positive: the relaxed and peer-led nature of the sessions has given the attendees freedom to open up and share their concerns without fear of being judged.

The welcome event in October 2012 provided an opportunity for new researchers to start to develop their peer networks, to meet the Hive Scholars and to find out about support available to them. More experienced researchers were encouraged to share five things they wish they had known when





3 Researchers at the Hive welcome event in 2012 (photo by Morten Watkins)

starting as a doctoral researcher, and new researchers were asked to create a to-do list for their first term. Participants wrote their ideas directly onto the glass wall of the Research Hive with washable pens (fig. 3). This acted as an icebreaker, creating a focus to spark discussions amongst the attendees. By leaving the text on the glass after the event, reflections were then shared with other users of the space throughout the rest of the term. This contributed to the sense of community and shared experience of the Hive users.

## 5 EVALUATION OF THE RESEARCH HIVE

Evaluation of the Hive is ongoing, carried out through a mixture of methods. At the end of each academic year, the Hive Scholars run an online survey of all researchers to gather data about who is using the space, how they are using it, how it can be improved and its role in creating a research community. Entry statistics and observational data are also collected.

Most users are doctoral students who use the Hive for quiet study, reading or working on the desktop PCs or on their own laptops. They use the Hive because they have no other suitable spaces on campus, it is convenient for access to the Library's book stock, and has a studious atmosphere. It also provides them with an opportunity to meet other researchers. Although some use the meeting rooms or engage in informal discussion, most use the Hive for quiet study. Those who do not use the Hive have other places to study, live too far away or find the space too noisy. Researchers have requested more PCs and laptop locks, which the Library has since provided. There have also been requests for a coffee machine or a water dispenser.

There is evidence that the Hive has had a beneficial effect in bringing researchers together and giving them a sense of belonging. Entry statistics show that nearly a third of all doctoral researchers across all subjects in the university used the Hive in its first nine months of opening. Many current Hive users previously worked at home and rarely came onto campus before it opened. Over half of survey respondents claim that the Hive has made them feel part of the research community at Sussex.

In addition to the survey, the Hive Scholars also organise focus groups of Hive users from a range of departments across campus. These show that the Hive is valued by those who make use of it, researchers liking its «exclusivity» and claiming that they are able to draw energy from the proximity of other researchers working alongside them. One researcher said that the presence of the Hive shows that the «university values our research».

## 6 DISCUSSION – ISSUES IN CREATING «ZWISCHENRÄUME»

When looking at the results of evaluations so far, it is clear that creating efficient «Zwischenräume»<sup>1</sup> is a challenge. For planners it can be helpful to take into consideration the following issues.

### 6.1 Ownership of the space

In creating a space for one particular subset of the Library's users, it is natural for that group to feel an element of ownership of the space, and indeed that ownership contributes to the sense of community which the Library and Doctoral School are trying to achieve. This can, for example be seen when, occasionally, undergraduate students have entered the space and this has been very quickly reported to the Library staff by regular Hive users. However, a strong sense of ownership can also create conflict. Who has the right to decide how it should be used: the institution or the community? Individuals who use the Hive regularly for quiet study feel that it is their space and can resent being asked to leave or to have their study disturbed because of an event. For example, when the university's Teaching and Learning Development Unit ran an event for researchers within the Hive one afternoon, making use of the desktop PCs and much of the space, some regular users felt that

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1 As there is no direct translation in the English language, the German has been used throughout. «Zwischenräume» also refers to a workshop within the [ITSI project](#) at the University of Basel (cf. article in this book).

they were being moved out in favour of «outsiders». Therefore, it is best to address users' ownership of the space through focus groups and discussions with the scholars about how to best develop the space. For it is important to remember that it is the owners of the space who are its best advocates.

## 6.2 Creating a «portable» Zwischenraum

The Research Hive is not an ideal space for formal events. The large sofas cannot easily be moved and so cannot be used as seating for presentations that are taking place at one end of the room. One solution to both the problem of ownership and the unsuitability of the space for holding certain types of event has been to organise Research Hive events which are not actually held within the space, for example the Research Hive Seminar Series which is held every spring elsewhere in the library. This allows us to take advantage of the Hive brand for promotional purposes, but to avoid dealing with the limitations of space and equipment that the space presents.

In November 2011, the Research Hive Scholars started a series of «shut up and write» events to encourage doctoral students to meet up for a coffee and chat, before a sustained period of intense writing. These sessions have been held in the Library café on the ground floor, where the participants can eat and drink and are inspired by the buzz of noise around them. The idea has now spread with students in different disciplines setting up their own «shut up and write» events in their departments and even taking them off campus and into Brighton city centre.

The scholars' visibility at events around campus is important in promoting the Hive, even when their activities are not related to the space itself. At a recent Doctoral School Christmas party, the scholars encouraged researchers to write a well-being tip that they would like to share with others onto coloured paper to decorate a «wellbeing» Christmas tree that was the centerpiece of the party. The tips will then be publicised by the scholars as part of the Doctoral School's «wellbeing week» later in the year.

## 6.3 Enabling (but not forcing) collaboration

It is evident from the evaluations of 2010 – 2012 that have been carried out that researchers do not wish to have any form of collaboration or exchange forced upon them. Observations recorded by the scholars show that very little collaboration, or even discussion, takes place within the main space on a daily basis and that it is overwhelmingly used for individual study. Organised

events to encourage informal dialogue, such as small group discussions on the sofas, have failed to attract attendees. However, the small group meeting rooms are regularly booked, and one researcher indicated in the evaluations that this was where they preferred to meet to work with others. As a result of this resistance to collaboration, the Hive Scholars have stopped organising smaller events within the Hive and concentrate on occasional larger informal gatherings, such as the welcome event, to encourage researchers to engage with each other and establish networks which they can then build on at a later date.

There is evidence that the Hive has had a positive effect on researchers working together, even in small ways such as finding a colleague who can translate an article written in a foreign language. Although many users value traditional quieter study environments, the focus groups held show that they do acknowledge the need to counteract the feelings of isolation they have as researchers. One user, for example, said: «It is a pleasant light and airy work-space. I like the fact that it gives you the opportunity to meet students from across campus.»

#### 6.4 Conflicting spaces

It is clear that the original vision for the Research Hive as both a place for exchange and a quiet study area was overambitious. The proximity of the two different types of space means that researchers having a discussion are concerned that they will be overheard or disturb others who are working quietly. Quiet can be imposed upon a space simply by unintentional peer-pressure, i.e. others who are already working quietly. Some Hive users feel rather intimidated by this quiet work atmosphere, as reflected in this student's statement: «The atmosphere in there is a bit strained, i.e. I like quiet but I was scared [...] to unzip my pencil case in case I made a noise.»

Meeting conflicting needs is a challenge Hive users are aware of:

*I think the Hive is a great idea. I haven't been to any of the <research events> which look like they give a good sense of research community. When I do visit the Hive, it's usually to read, because it's always quiet. But this also means that it doesn't seem to be a great space for <community> or meeting to chat etc. Perhaps the bookable rooms would be useful for that. It's a great space and I'm glad it's there, but I think the fact it's both a <work> area and a <discussion> area doesn't quite fit. I would prefer it was more a common-room type of space, but I suppose as it's in the library it's intended more as work space. Still, it's a good space to have.*

## 6.5 Informal spaces and refreshments

Survey and focus groups all suggest that the users of the Research Hive would like to see refreshments within the Hive, whether in the form of a coffee machine, a water fountain or merely by bringing their own drinks in with them. This conflicts with the Library's current policy, which in a recent survey was supported by a small majority of users overall.

Allowing refreshments would create a very different ambiance within the space with increased informality, exchange and discussion. At the moment, there is no plan to change the current policy, as there are many other places on campus (including the Library café) where users can eat and drink. Some people also fear that part of the Library's unique character as a place for serious study and exchange would be lost if the policy was changed.

## 7 CONCLUSION

Two years after opening, the Research Hive and its scholar scheme are now embedded into the research culture at the university. Information about the Hive is included in research degree handbooks, and the space is promoted to potential students as part of the suite of support for doctoral researchers in the university's postgraduate prospectus. Library concerns about lack of usage were unfounded, and the research community clearly has a sense of ownership of the space while users are at the same time also conscious that it remains a part of the Library, generally observing rules on food and drink, and not reserving individual spaces with their personal belongings.

The area itself is not ideally suited to exchange, being limited in terms of size, flexibility and to some extent by its location within the Library. At the beginning, attempts were made to encourage the use of the Hive for collaboration by holding events within the space, but this led to tensions with researchers' preferred use of the space as an area for quiet study. Perhaps the only solution to this problem would be to clearly divide the space in two with a soundproof barrier.

The Research Hive has clearly had a beneficial effect on the identity of the research community at Sussex, mainly because it is not just a space, but comes with a support structure around it, in the form of the Research Hive Scholars. In this way, the space has been used in more imaginative ways. By enabling members of the community to lead the development of the area and provide a level of peer-support around it, a unique method of supporting the research community has been created, which reaches far beyond the walls of



the Research Hive. Although interdisciplinary exchange within the space is limited, the Hive brand is synonymous with the collaborative events and discussions organised by the scholars across the university campus. As another UK library director observed: «You can't be sure how these spaces will be used: you are just creating the opportunities for things to happen» (JISC, 2006, p. 31).

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